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ABSTRACT

"Digital communications" refers to a set of four modules--information gathering, message preparation, editing and production, and message delivery. The modular concept is intended to be flexible enough to accommodate the needs of various higher education journalism and mass communication programs. Digital communications does not replace or displace any traditional skills or concepts taught by schools of journalism and mass communication. Digital communications extends those skills and concepts to include multimedia content, which is encoded, manipulated, and stored on computers. By grounding experiential learning in a foundation of conceptual thinking, journalism and mass communication programs may cultivate a new and improved image. Digital communications is a cutting-edge educational concept, with opportunities to develop interdisciplinary courses. Research opportunities abound. Funding opportunities exist, as well as the chance to develop entrepreneurial partnerships with local media. (RS)

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Digital Communications:

A modular approach to a 21st century curriculum

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Digital Communications:
A modular approach to a 21st century curriculum

ABSTRACT

"Digital Communications" refers to a set of four modules -- information gathering, message preparation, editing & production, and message delivery. The modular concept is intended to be flexible enough to accommodate your program's needs.

Digital Communications does not replace or displace any traditional skills or concepts taught by schools of journalism and mass communication. Digital Communications does extend those skills and concepts to include multimedia content, which is encoded, manipulated and stored on computers.

A modification of Blanchard & Christ's (1993) New Professionalism, the Digital Communications approach may improve and enhance your academic unit's service and centrality to the mission of your institution. By grounding experiential learning in a foundation of conceptual thinking, journalism and mass communication programs may cultivate a new and improved image.

Digital communications is a cutting-edge educational concept, with opportunities to develop interdisciplinary courses (with information science, education, and computer science, for example). Research opportunities abound (media effects studies, for example). Funding opportunities exist, as well as the chance to develop entrepreneurial partnerships with local media.

Dutch Fork High School in Irmo, South Carolina has an online edition of its newspaper, *The Renaissance* (http://www. scsn.net/biz/dfork/). High school students are applying digital technologies to traditional newspaper skills.

Will your university's journalism and mass communication program attract and accommodate today's high school students?

This paper presents a concept that may help you increase enrollment by attracting computer-literate students.

At the Raleigh (North Carolina) *News & Observer*, "digitized information skills -- for using computers, databases, online services -- are becoming standard for nearly everyone in the newsroom" (Moeller 1995, p. 43).

And a concept called "team journalism" is enabling multimedia projects. In 1994, the *News & Observer* created a 16-week series that "ran in the paper, aired on local radio and television, and was uploaded onto the Internet via NandO, the paper's online service" (Moeller 1995, p. 46). During

this project, "newspaper" reporters conducted videotaped and audiotaped interviews intended for broadcast.

Will employers, such as the Raleigh *News & Observer*, recruit your university's journalism and mass communication graduates?

This paper presents a concept that may improve your academic unit's service to a communications industry that is digitizing its newsrooms.

New positions have been created to staff new online services. Boston Globe Electronic Publishing, a subsidiary of *The Boston Globe* newspaper, has announced employment opportunities for "developing news, advertising and information services for consumer online distribution, the Internet, and other emerging interactive platforms" (Online-news 1995a). The positions included: development director, advertising manager, editorial manager, marketing coordinator, graphics/design coordinator, and content developers/entrepreneurs.

Houston Chronicle Interactive has announced employment opportunities (Online-news 1995b). The positions included: content developers, electronic media wire editors, communications coordinator, electronic media producers, marketing services specialist, member services coordinator, audiotext coordinator, software developers, systems technician, and system administrator.

Does your curriculum reflect these organizational developments?

This paper presents a curriculum called Digital Communications. Digital Communications is a modular concept that may be implemented at different levels -- from "College of Digital Communications" to "major in Digital Communications" to "this course includes the four modules of the concept called Digital Communications." Digital Communications is an idea

that synthesizes current developments in the structure of academic units, the structure of media organizations, and emerging media routines.

As Dutch Fork High School's nameplate suggests, a new Renaissance has begun.

> Whether it is called a communication, information, or technological revolution, rapid changes within the U.S. media system coupled with new ways of thinking about communication processes and content challenge media educators to rethink curricular structures and what and how they teach. This challenge calls for flexible, integrated, and innovative media courses and curricula; it means a movement away from narrowly conceived media-specific sequences based on industrial configurations toward broad-based, cross-media, integrative models; the teaching of ideas and skills that transcend the narrow occupational focus of specific, entry-level, job-related protocols; "demassifying" the concept of communication to incorporate the study of intrapersonal and interpersonal communication and their relationship to "mass" forms of communication distribution; and, finally, rethinking how people teach and how learning environments can be enhanced with the use of technologies.
>
> - Blanchard & Christ (1993, p. 22)

> Janis (1991) suggested that "the media workplace of the future will be an information technologies theme park, where technical distinctions among the attractions will blur and everyone will speak the same language -- digital (p. 18).
>
> - Blanchard & Christ (1993, p. 31)

Blanchard & Christ (1993, pp. 47-53) describe a curriculum for a "New Professionalism" in media education programs. To grossly oversimplify their work, Blanchard & Christ propose a core curriculum based on conceptual

perspectives and knowledge -- including what they call a "conceptual map" of communication processes and their context within "historical, legal-ethical, institutional, social, economic, and other social systems." The conceptual core includes "technological literacy." And it includes "information gathering and media writing and speaking capability, including the ability to gather and present information systematically in written and oral form" (p. 47).

Beyond this conceptual core, experiential learning -- "hands-on" instruction -- is considered "essential" (p. 50). Blanchard & Christ recommend a laboratory setting: "The media laboratory would provide for systematic investigation and experimentation with purposeful challenging of media content and forms. Reflecting the liberal ethos, it would go beyond the replication of contemporary management and occupational hierarchies, as useful as they might be" (p. 50).

By modifying Blanchard & Christ's concept, a curriculum that applies Digital Communications may improve and enhance your academic unit's service and centrality to the mission of your institution. By grounding experiential learning in a foundation of conceptual thinking, journalism and mass communication programs may cultivate a new and improved image.

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The Concept of "Digital Communications"

"Digital Communications" refers to a set of four modules -- information gathering, message preparation, editing & production, and message delivery. The modular concept is intended to be flexible enough to accommodate your program's needs.

For example, you may choose to offer a major in Digital Communications. Each of the four modules may be taught as a separate course. The four modules may be taught concurrently as an in-house internship experience. Or, two modules may be taught in the fall semester as introductory courses for the other two modules, which may be taught in the spring semester.

Or, a particularly energetic instructor could treat the modules as elements of one existing course. Any professor could incorporate at least one module into an existing course plan.

In other words, the modular concept allows flexibility. The modules are designed to be related and complementary, yet free-standing.

> Disclaimer: Digital Communications does not replace or displace any traditional skills or concepts taught by schools of journalism and mass communication. Digital Communications does extend those skills and concepts to include multimedia content, which is encoded, manipulated and stored on computers.
>
> These modules do not replace or displace core content. Rather, the digital concept may be incorporated into classroom teaching methods to enhance student involvement in core courses.

The concept may be applied to many forms of content in many disciplines, tracks, or sequences. Text, photographic image, video, and audio content are all accommodated by the concept of Digital Communications. Professors of newspaper, magazine, photojournalism, advertising, public relations, radio and television may utilize these teaching modules.

Because this author's background is print and multimedia, the explanations presented in this paper will demonstrate a bias toward adapting newspaper and magazine courses to this modular curriculum.

Note: Try not to get stuck on semantics. So far, it doesn't matter what these modules are called.

The working names and working definitions for the four modules are:

Module #1: Information Gathering

For print media (including photojournalism), broadcast media, advertising, and public relations, this information gathering module applies traditional information gathering skills such as interviewing, scouring the public record, and covering current events.

Interviewing -- Face-to-face and telephone interviewing skills will still be taught and practiced. For advertising, this may include focus groups and surveys. The Digital Communications concept applies and extends these methods.

Now, e-mail interviews may be conducted. These interviews may be conducted in "real time," as a typed discussion between interviewer and subject. Interviews may also be conducted as a "time-independent" exchange of questions and answers -- the interviewer sends a list of questions to which the subject replies when convenient.

E-mail interviews seem to invite follow-up. There is a "reply" key built into many e-mail programs.

E-mail interviews allow subjects who may be shy, reclusive, or very busy to answer with relative comfort and a sense of control. Some subjects may electronically transmit supplemental materials -- from text to digitized photos to video clips.

Also, E-mail interviews allow shy or insecure students to practice their interviewing skills with relative comfort and a sense of control.

Research of available, existing resources -- This includes "library research" -- from using the dictionary to investigative use of city, county, state, and federal documents. For advertising, this may include collection of demographic data. Again, the Digital Communications concept applies and extends these methods.

Now, we can add computer-assisted reporting (C.A.R.) to the repertoire. Database searches may be conducted. Surfing the Internet may turn up relevant information. Involvement with discussion lists may be used to develop a "global beat," including networking to develop sources.

And multimedia resources may be searched. We are not looking for text only. Now, we can search for text, audio, video, and other images.

Documentation of current events -- In other words, reporting, shooting raw video, taking notes at the scene, etc. The Digital Communications concept applies and extends these methods.

Now, one reporter takes a video camera and a laptop computer to document the event. That reporter returns with content that may be used as text, still image (capture one frame of the video), video, audio (the sound track from the video).

Future research of Digital Communications applications may reveal that students and professionals are highly involved, psychologically, with the information gathering process. Perhaps information culled from both traditional and digitized resources will be more substantive than facts gathered with traditional methods only.

Module #2: Message Preparation

Courses and course content that deal with creation of media content may apply this second module. Message Preparation may include writing for mass media, advertising copy writing, news writing, feature writing, information graphics, mass media PC graphics applications, public relations writing, darkroom techniques, broadcast announcing, television production, radio production, and others.

The Digital Communications concept applies and extends the methods and skills presented in a traditional curriculum. But now, each student works with digitized content.

Students still learn to use word processors, video cameras, microphones, cameras, etc. But Digital Communications adds scanners, digital cameras, and computers with video cards (or Macintosh-AV).

This is convergence within the curriculum. Every student performs a variety of message production tasks for a variety of media.

Digital Communications simply creates a "homogeneous" environment for the study of media. The literal and symbolic walls of the sequence-based structure of academic units are no longer necessary because the computer becomes the video editing studio, the digital darkroom, the graphics lab, and the writing lab. Students work in teams. Professors collaborate.

Here's an idea that could be applied to the Message Preparation module. In a course designed with a pubic relations emphasis, press release preparation would be covered. A traditional course teaches students to produce written press releases. Another traditional course teaches students to prepare video news releases (VNRs).

By applying digital communications concepts, a digital press release (DPR) could be created. On disk, or on CD-ROM, the press release could include text items for print media, digitized photographs for print media, digitized video clips for television use, digitized audio clips for radio use, and supplemental information (background) that could provide context for the DPR. In professional situations, the information could be distributed by mail, or electronically through file transfer protocol (ftp). In academic situations, the assignment is graded from the disk.

Each student learns public relations skills. But, those skills are not media-dependent.

This should improve students' conceptual and critical thinking skills. Digital communications encourages and requires students ... and professors ... to think in multiple dimensions -- aural (listening to radio and television content, perhaps even sound effects embedded in text), visual (reading text and viewing video), and tactile (with an interactive media interface).

Module #3: Editing & Production

Again, the basic skills and concepts remain the same. Proper selection of material, style, copy editing, video editing, and audio editing are still taught. Production processes that have been introduced in other courses are now applied in laboratory situations. These courses may include: advanced radio programming, advanced television programming, advanced magazine and newspaper editing, graphic design, and, perhaps, advertising campaigns.

In a traditional curriculum, students may not get much hands-on experience until they enroll in upper-division editing and production courses. In a Digital Communications curriculum, students work with computers from the beginning.

Today's college students have grown up with the computer. They have used computers in their high schools, junior high schools, perhaps even grade schools. And many of them have had access to a computer at home.

In a way, a Digital Communications curriculum simply provides the tools with which today's students are most familiar. These students do not know what a T-square looks like, but they can use the "guides" in PageMaker.

In module #3, students learn to edit and produce digitized content. They may be preparing content for the weekly newspaper. What they are doing is desktop publishing and pagination, using programs like Quark Xpress and Photoshop.

They may be preparing the evening newscast. They are just using a program like Adobe Premiere to edit digitized videos.

These students may be preparing a presentation for AAF's annual competition. But, they may use a program like infini-D to create a 3D effect.

Or, a team of students may be creating a home page on the World Wide Web. What they are doing is a form of electronic publishing, using HTML (hypertext mark up language) to create their links to the global information network.

This is innovative, experiential learning. Students are challenged by this type of learning environment. They are motivated by it. And they learn from it.

Module #4: Message Delivery

Students will still disseminate messages in traditional ways. The newspaper and magazine are printed, and the anchors broadcast the day's news for television and radio. As far as the audience knows, nothing has changed. As far as educators are concerned, the process has not changed. But the techniques have been updated and upgraded.

With a curriculum in Digital Communications, the horizon is expanded. The online newspaper and magazine are uploaded to the Internet. Online radio and television content is uploaded to the Internet.

Student system administrators update files for the information server (another computer). They track subscribers. They record the number of times users access certain categories of information and add, delete, or modify subject headings to accommodate the subscriber base. They do demographics. And they get direct, real-time data that tells them if, when, how often, and for how long a digital, multimedia advertisement is accessed.

Editors respond to e-mail feedback from audience members.

A team of students may develop a CD-ROM product. Perhaps the yearbook is sold on CD, complete with mugshots that come to life with a video clip. Now, graduates can hear their college buddies once again.

Comments

This Digital Communications curriculum is an idea "under constuction." The author encourages readers to expand, develop, adapt and adopt the idea.

If you believe your department cannot possibly afford a computer-based program of study, use the cliché -- "Can we afford not to?" High schools are

practicing electronic publishing. The media industry is digitizing its operations.

You can afford Digital Communications at some level. Look around. If your department has a (new) Macintosh computer, a video camera, a flatbed scanner, a slide scanner, and a laser printer, then you can get started.

Add Internet connections, and you've entered the next dimension.

This paper has attempted to provide a basic, skeletal structure upon which you and your program may build. But, the system is not the solution. Without a solid conceptual core, no academic program will remain indispensable to the mission of the university. Without innovative experiential learning opportunities, enrollments will continue to wane.

By adapting to the emerging professional and educational cultures of the 21st century, media programs and their graduates will thrive. So, digitize. Now!

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